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FORD, LABOR AND PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

ANNCR:

LABOR'S UNHAPPINESS WITH A RECENT PRESIDENTIAL VETO WAS UNDERSCORED THURSDAY WHEN ALL NINE TRADE UNION MEMBERS OF A WHITE HOUSE ADVISORY BOARD RESIGNED IN PROTEST. CHARLES MEDD EXAMINES THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF LABOR'S RIFT WITH MISTER FORD.

VOICE:

WHEN A BILL TO STRENGTHEN THE BARGAINING POWER OF CONSTRUCTION UNIONS REACHED THE WHITE HOUSE LATE LAST YEAR, PRESIDENT FORD HAD TWO CHOICES -- SIGN THE BILL AND ANGER MANAGEMENT OR VETO IT AND ANGER LABOR. HE CHOSE THE LATTER, AND EVER SINCE THE UNIONS HAVE BEEN HOWLING, AS EXPECTED. FOR THE PAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, AMERICAN LABOR HAS BEEN PRESSING FOR LEGISLATION TO ALLOW INDIVIDUAL UNIONS TO FORM PICKET LINES AROUND BUILDING PROJECTS EVEN IF IT DISRUPTED THE WORK OF CONTRACTORS NOT INVOLVED IN A PARTICULAR DISPUTE. EVERY PRESIDENT SINCE HARRY TRUMAN HAS GIVEN AT LEAST TACIT APPROVAL OF LABOR'S POSITION. BUT LAST SUMMER GERALD FORD WENT A STEP FURTHER. THE PRESIDENT TOLD HIS LABOR SECRETARY, JOHN DUNLOP, HE WOULD BACK THE MEASURE PROVIDED IT WAS ACCOMPANIED BY GUARANTEES OF MORE RATIONAL BARGAINING PROCEDURES THROUGHOUT THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY.

WORKING CLOSELY WITH PRO-LABOR CONGRESSMEN, DUNLOP DRAFTED LEGISLATION THAT APPARENTLY MET THE STANDARDS SET BY PRESIDENT FORD, AND IN DECEMBER IT RECEIVED FAVORABLE

VOTES IN BOTH HOUSES OF CONGRESS. BUT BY THEN, THE WHITE HOUSE WAS HAVING SECOND THOUGHTS. THERE WAS INTENSE PRESSURE FROM ORGANIZED BUSINESS TO BLOCK THE LAW, AND THERE WAS EVEN MORE PRESSURE FROM REPUBLICANS WHO ARGUED THAT APPROVAL WOULD HELP MISTER FORD'S CONSERVATIVE CHALLENGER, RONALD REAGAN.

IN CASTING A VETO, THE PRESIDENT SAID HE DID SO "MOST RELUCTANTLY", ATTRIBUTING HIS DECISION TO WHAT HE CALLED "VIGOROUS CONTROVERSY." BUT TO CRUSTY OLD GEORGE MEANY OF THE AFL-CIO THE DECISION WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A "SELL-OUT." THE PRESIDENT -- CHARGED MEANY -- HAD BROKEN HIS WORD.

THE SUBSEQUENT WALK-OUT BY LABOR MEMBERS OF A WHITE HOUSE ADVISORY BOARD CAME AS NO SURPRISE. WHAT WAS SURPRISING WAS THE BITTER RHETORIC DIRECTED AT THE PRESIDENT BY THE NINE UNION LEADERS, AMONG THEM CONSERVATIVES WHO OFTEN SUPPORT THE REPUBLICANS. THE LABOR GROUP LEFT WITH THE WARNING THAT SOME MIGHT SUPPORT GOVERNOR REAGAN IN THE COMING PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES.

(STILL ANOTHER THREAT IS THE POSSIBLE RESIGNATION OF SECRETARY DUNLOP WHO REPORTEDLY BELIEVES HIS EFFECTIVENESS HAS BEEN SEVERELY UNDERCUT BY THE FORD VETO.) (WHITE HOUSE PROBLEMS WERE FURTHER COMPOUNDED BY THE RESIGNATION OF SECRETARY DUNLOP, WHO SAID HIS EFFECTIVENESS WAS UNDER CUT BY THE FORD VETO.) REACTION TO THE VETO DEMONSTRATES THE POLITICAL PERILS OF AN ELECTION YEAR. IF IT'S ANY COMFORT TO THE PRESIDENT, APPROVAL OF THE BILL MIGHT HAVE PROVED EVEN MORE DAMAGING.

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